The Winged Life of R. W. Emerson

Toshihiko Ogata

I

Transcendentalism was the most important force in American intellectual life during the middle third of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the main themes of Transcendentalism were a search for faith and a reaction against Unitarianism. The Transcendentalists believed that they could know all of spiritual reality.

Emerson was the first thinker in the American spirit. Although America had won its political independence twenty-two years before he was born, it still took its culture form Europe. He was a poetic thinker who trusted inspiration more than reason, and he was always aware of a lack of continuity in his lectures and essays. As much as possible he avoided speaking on matters of current importance. But spiritually and personally he was a man of such freedom and a man of such exalted character that his influence was great, and he fired men's minds. Since his basic topic was the infinite capacity of the private man, his writings remain as fresh as they were when he assembled them out of random thoughts and flashes of insight. Perhaps it may be said that he based his thought on Neo-Platonism and Montaigne's theory and on American Puritanism.

The native Unitarianism and skepticism Emerson transcended in search of the headier, more dangerous realities which he identified with what he called the soul. German philosophy and Oriental scriptures were new fields in which he was to read. He was preparing himself now to be the lecturer and writer whom the world of the nineteenth century came to know so well. Emerson came of a long line of New England clergymen and was a member of a family that instinctively inclined toward the ministry. He was born in Boston on May 25, 1803, son of the pastor of

the Second Church. A brother and sister died as children. The privations of the Emerson family after the death of Emerson's father bore particularly hard on unsound constitutions, and Emerson entered Harvard College in 1817 at the age of fourteen. He did not distinguish himself. At Harvard, he commenced keeping his famous journal. In it we may trace his doubts of himself as he sought first to be a teacher and then a preacher. The bulk of its entries is speculative. In the journal he revealed how irresistible to him were the successful sayings of other men. The art of quotation has seldom been practiced with an equal perfection. "He believed in quotation," says Oliver Wendell Holmes, "and borrowed from everybody and every book."

Formidable Mary Moody Emerson's visits were frequent. Her contribution to his success is something we cannot doubt. Although his mother was left with a growing family and in desperate financial circumstances, she determined that her boys should be educated. She succeeded. Four of them went through college. It was a hard, driving life that left its mark on the health of the children, for two of them died. After teaching school Emerson entered Harvard Divinity School, but weak lungs and eyes and rheumatism interrupted his education for the ministry and he had to spend a winter recuperating in the South. He was shy, modest and he felt that he was too cold for social intercourse. During his school-teaching days his embarrassment was painful. The personal visits expected of a pastor were also a trial for him. He did not dominate groups by force of personality. His best thinking was done in private. In 1829, he was ordained assistant pastor of the Second Church, where his father had preached, and soon succeeded to full charge of the parish. At this time he married Ellen Tucker of Concord, New Hampshire, but she lived only a year and a half afterward. The formal customs of religious observance had always been somewhat distasteful to Emerson.

In 1832 he announced to his congregation that he could no longer administer the sacrament because he did not believe that Christ had intended it as a general, regular observance. Although he was well liked in his parish, the church decided that it could not dispense with the Lord's Supper, and Emerson resigned. Emerson never learned to joke, but from

the beginning he studied how to command the whole scale of human discourse. "Every one has felt," he said, "how superior in force is the language of the street to that of the academy.... The speech of the man in the street is invariably strong, nor can you mend it by making it what you call parliamentary. You say, 'If he could only express himself'; but he does already, better than any one can for him.... The power of their speech is, that it is perfectly understood by all.... And observe that all poetry is written in the oldest and simplest English words." Emerson admired Plato sincerely.

Disappointed in his professional life, troubled by the death of his wife and also the death of one of his brothers and in poor health himself, he sailed for Italy in the winter. The trip restored his health. He took joy in the great art treasures of Italy. In England he met with Coleridge, Wordsworth and Carlyle. Returning to America in good health a year later he settled in Concord, where his step-grandfather, Ezra Ripley, was living in the Old Manse. Presently Emerson bought a house and land, married Lidia Jackson of Plymouth and settled down to a happy life. He was thirty-two years old. In the winters he gave lectures wherever he was invited through New England, the Atlantic States and the Middle West. Although he was slender and weak, his voice had astonishing volume.

It was the period of the philosophical committees, for example Brook Farm and Fruit-lands. As the leading transcendental philosopher of the day, Emerson was consulted by everyone who had a new system. They all came to his house; but Emerson, having no taste for community enterprises, steadfastly dissociated himself from them. Emerson insisted that books are for the student's idle hours; colleges likewise are secondary for a man's thinking; they look backward and not forward.

Literary histories often mislink Transcendentalism with such social experiments as Brook Farm. It is interesting that Hawthorne, himself a former Brook Farmer, also had his hut in Concord, but he descended to his family dinner each day more wholeheartedly than the transcendentalists ever did. Hawthorne could draw the curtain between life and art. Emerson reported: "The experience of the colleagues of Brook Farm was

unanimous, 'We have no thoughts'." With their "new modes of thinking," the transcendentalists had no interest in transforming society in the way that utopian experimenters intended. Other reformers tried to enlist audiences in their enthusiasms. But transcendentalist eloquence was less a matter of propaganda than of prophecy. Whatever meaning nature and experience held could only be achieved by meditation. In his Savings Bank (Journal) he jotted down poetical or rhetorical phrases for future use; he collected his thoughts, knowing that some day he should need them for a book or a lecture. From them he drew the material of his addresses. Whether the first sketches were prose or verse, meditations upon human life or analyses of himself, they all went into the Saving Bank as reserve capital for the hour of need.

That lack of unity and coherence and sustained logic which has so frequently been charged against Emerson as a writer of prose is naturally less perceptible upon the random pages of the Savings Bank.

II

Emerson published his first book, *Nature*, in 1836. It was his most systematic one. He never captured again its symmetry, though its ideas are distributed through all of his other works. It is Emerson hoping to be a philosopher, which he never was.

> "Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature; whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts.

Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswer able. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire to what end is nature?"

Emerson's attitude toward life was based on his love of nature and is stated in *Nature*. He began: "Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture." He rejoiced that man is part of nature and that nature is his home. The most significant statement he made is: "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."

Emerson lived his early life in an expansionist period when Americans were pushing west in numbers and acting upon the principle of democracy. Complete independence in spirit as well as in fact was everywhere in the air. What the statesmen had already accomplished in the sphere of politics Emerson applied to culture. In a courageous address on "The American Scholar" in the next year he said: "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe"; and he counseled the scholars assembled in Cambridge Massachusetts to live and think like free men.

Emerson's complaint of his contemporaries was that they lacked self-reliance. Between the publication of *Nature* and the publication of the *Essays*, Emerson delivered a series of addresses which announced him as the prophet of his generation. They were prophetic by intention as well as in tone.

The American Scholar is a declaration of intellectual independence. The Divinity School Address measured the possible future of religion in America, and moved its audience to consider whether the realities of that

future had yet been taken into account. He was successful in the series of ringing addresses he delivered in which he repeated the gist of the foregoing sentences, and applied it where it was needed. *The American Scholar* is still the most famous of these addresses, though a close rival is the one he made next year to the graduating class of the Divinity School at Cambridge. Both were electric in their effect, and together they set a foundation beneath the career Emerson was now about to build. In some of the most famous utterances of the Divinity School Address, and of Emerson's famous essays, we can trace the whole story of Emerson's revolt against a conventionalized conception of Christianity. He said in the Address: "The time is coming when all men will see that the gift of God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness, a goodness like thine and mine, and that so invites thine and mine to be and to grow." He complained that religion was treated in the pulpit "as if God were dead."

III

Many of Emerson's essays are disorderly: not every subject pulled all his random reflections together. But in "Self-Reliance" he courageously exhorts his readers to act on their best impulses and to make no compromise with duty.

> "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being.... Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."

Although he was a mild man personally, he was a kind of mystic who encouraged others to accept Self-Reliance as the voice of God.

The Transcendentalists had no adequate conception of evil—for which

we must go to *The Scarlet letter* and *Moby-Dick*. These works glow with an infernal light not to be found in *Nature* or *Walden*. The true source of our preference for facing the evil in life is the appeal of the fictive mode of consciousness itself. The central theme of "Compensation" is the problem of evil. While we accuse the transcendentalists of narrow-mindedness, what we really object to is their failure to write narrative. Their works seem to us dull admonition and good cheer. A criticism that must be made, however, is that the Transcendentalists took no interest in fiction. They thought that fictions were more or less despicable. They were interested in moral statement and failed to appreciate the novel's capacity for dramatizing the ambiguities and conflicts of the moral life. Emerson did not lecture on "The Over-Soul" specifically. The essay as it appears in his writings was compiled and rewritten from statements in several related lectures. Emerson believed in the over-soul, that is, the universal soul of which everything living was a part. Even in Emerson's own day the word "transcendentalism" was considered confusing, and the popular meaning of the word is still "vague, obscure, visionary." "What is popularly called transcendentalism among us is idealism," Emerson once said. Emerson proceeded to a description of the Over-Soul.

> "Thus revering the soul, and learning, as the ancient said, that 'its beauty is immense,' man will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time. He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity. He will cease from what is base and frivolous in his life and be content with all places and with any service he can render. He will calmly front the morrow in the negligency of that trust which carries God with it and so hath already the whole future in the bottom of the heart."
>
> He also said:

"When it breathes through man's intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will it is virtue; when it ploughs through his affection, it is

love." Finally faith in the Over-Soul gives man immense scope and gives every moment tremendous significance: "Man will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time." Many men were not willing to follow Emerson because identifying man with God seemed like heresy. Many men thought it was rhapsody or wishful thinking. To believe himself part of universal wisdom gave him a wonderful sense of freedom. It was the ultimate liberation. Life seemed good; nature and man could be trusted. The *Essays* are still his best writings. In them he is the writer preaching, with an ethical passion which would be proper to any man, yet with a tendency to abandon art for unction, to lose the subject in an attitude that takes the place of principle. Having found a tone, Emerson makes the most of it. Many readers speak of a monotony in the inspiration, an overly great rarity in the discourse, and a drift in all the *Essays* toward a single end at which Emerson seems unable to arrive.

IV

Representative Men gains by possessing a theme which can be stated. Emerson's speculation was unlimited, his language was that of a lay genius, not of a divine.

> "It is natural to believe in great men. If the companions of our childhood should turn out to be heroes, and their condition regal it would not surprise us. All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic; that is, their genius is paramount. In the legends of the Gautama, the first men ate the earth and found it deliciously sweet.
>
> Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome. They who lived with them found life glad and nutritious. Life is sweet and tolerable only in our belief in such society; and, actually or ideally, we manage to live with superiors. We call our children and our lands

by their names. Their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of them.

The search after the great man is the dream of youth and the most serious occupation of manhood. We travel into foreign parts to find his works,—if possible, to get a glimpse of him. But we are put off with fortune instead. You pass away; the qualities remain on another brow. No experience is more familiar. Once you saw phoenixes: they are gone; the world is not therefore disenchanted. The vessels on which you read sacred emblems turn out to be common pottery; but the sense of the pictures is sacred, and you may still read them transferred to the walls of the world. For a time our teachers serve us personally, as metres or milestones of progress. Once they were angels of knowledge and their figures touched the sky. Then we drew near, saw their means, culture and limits; and they yielded their place to other geniuses. Happy, if a few names remain so high that we have not been able to read them nearer, and age and comparison have not robbed them of a ray. But at last we shall cease to look in men for completeness, and shall content ourselves with their social and delegated quality. All that respects the individual is temporary and prospective, like the individual himself, who is ascending out of his limits into a catholic existence. We have never come at the true and best benefit of any genius so long as we believe him an original force. In the moment when he ceases to help us as a cause, he begins to help us more as an effect. Then he appears as an exponent of a vaster mind and will. The opaque self becomes transparent with the light of the First Cause.

To all obedient readers Emerson said "The language of the street is always strong. What can describe the folly and emptiness of scolding like the word *jawing*? I feel too the force of the double negative, though clean contrary to our grammar rules.... Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive; they walk and run. Moreover they who speak them have this elegancy, that they do not trip in their speech. It is a shower of bullets, whilst Cambridge men and Yale men correct themselves

and begin again at every half sentence, ..." But Emerson never learned to joke, and he disliked laughter. The reason he selected Montaigne is that he found his likeness in him, not because Emerson loved him more than Plato or Shakespeare. To each one of certain representative men Emerson explained and gave his opinions and the most important thing is that he introduced himself through them. After more than ten years of lecturing, Emerson got an invitation to give some of his lectures in England for a year. Traveling around England, he had an opportunity to become intimately acquainted with many types of English people. He renewed his old friendships, particularly with Carlyle. He also visited France. *English Traits* is the most literary book among all his works. *The Conduct of Life* seems to be a sinking sun which shows him an old man.

V

It was his practice to gather sentences on a particular subject from his journals without regard to when they were written, and put together those which belonged together. He was not only a great thinker and writer. He also influenced many American thinkers. Emerson published *Poems* (1847) and *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1867). Emerson as a poet has been variously praised. His fine lines has in them the strange, rapt music which is easier to hear than to explain. He believed that poetic emotion came as suddenly as a fragrance in spring. Rarely, he reaches excellence at the top of his form. He said: "we must use the language of fact and not be superstitiously abstract." He said that pure fact was what he searched for wherever he looked, and the hope of finding it sharpened his gaze. He said: "I like that poetry which, without aiming to be allegorical, is so. Which, sticking close to its subject, and that perhaps trivial, can yet be applied to the life of man and the government of God and be found to hold." He composed it and called it *The Poet*.

It may be impossible to understand Emerson's theory of poetry without knowledge of his faith in God and reliance on man and nature.

VI

In the 1840's there were many reform movements competing for the honor of naming the root of society's evil and putting the axe to it: abolitionism, phrenology, prison and asylum reform, temperance, compulsory education, women's rights, land reform, workingmen's associations, and so on. Emerson said in a lecture: "The revolutions that impend over society are not now from ambition and rapacity, from impatience of one or another form of government, but from new modes of thinking, which shall recompose society after a new order, which shall animate labor by love and science, which shall destroy the value of many kinds of property, and replace all property within the dominion of reason and equity."

Emerson had no faith in violence or its tactics. When he found himself literally on the scene in 1848, during a visit to England, he noted in his journal: "People here expect a revolution. There will be no revolution, none that deserves to be called so. There may be a scramble for money. But as all the people we see want the things we now have, and not better things, it is very certain that they will, under whatever change of forms, keep the old system." And also: "All spiritual or real power makes its own place. Revolutions of violence then are scrambles merely."

As the slavery clamor increased, Emerson began to join in it. When the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, and Daniel Webster had betrayed the public trust, Emerson appeared at public meetings in Concord, Boston and New York and spoke with a bitterness strange to him. Emerson entertained John Brown in his house and spoke in defense of him after Harper's Ferry.

Emerson had begun to lose his memory and his concentration of mind only a few years after the close of the Civil War, which itself was a hard period for him to live through. He was doubtful of reformers and skeptical of social programs. In 1838 he had written a letter of protest to President Van Buren against the removal of the Cherokee Indians from Georgia, and he had disapproved of the Fugitive Slave Act, the treatment

of John Brown, and slavery as an institution. "Sometimes gunpowder smells good," he said when war broke out. When his house in Concord burned and he travelled a third time to Europe, and saw Carlyle for the last time. Transcendentalism did not survive the war. In the Gilded Age it ceased to matter.

To all the readers trained to accept the voice of authority, Emerson said: "Lay this volume down. You had better never see my essays than to be warped by their attraction out of your own orbit and made my satellite." Emerson wanted no followers. His wish was to bring men not to him but to themselves. His message to each man was that each is great and should think for himself. Most individuals were not aware of the greatness within them. Emerson's optimism could be harmless but at its worst it could be dangerous. He trusted the world not to be tragic. This suggests how seriously he was limited by having no theory of evil. Most of the time that he spent over work was spent in searching his journals. He lived a quiet and contented life with his family and friends until April, 1882. If Emerson had been gifted with more charisma, he would perhaps have built up his own world: the World of Emersonism.